

PUBLIC HEALTH AND DENTAL CARE: BRIDGING THE GAP FOR BETTER HEALTH

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Oral health is a vital component of general health and well-being. Yet, dental care is often overlooked within public health systems, resulting in widespread disparities in access and outcomes. As the global burden of oral diseases grows, integrating dental care into public health strategies is more important than ever.

The Significance of Oral Health

Oral health goes beyond teeth and gums. It affects our ability to eat, speak, socialize, and enjoy a good quality of life. Poor oral hygiene is not only linked to pain and tooth loss but also contributes to several chronic diseases, including:

- Cardiovascular diseases
- Diabetes mellitus
- Respiratory infections
- Adverse pregnancy outcomes

These associations highlight the need to treat oral health as an essential part of public health systems.

Current Challenges in Dental Public Health

1. Access and Equity

A major challenge is the unequal access to dental care. Marginalized groups—including those in rural areas, low-income families, racial minorities, and individuals with disabilities—often lack access to preventive and therapeutic services.

2. Cost of Dental Services

In many countries, dental care is not fully covered by public health insurance, making it unaffordable for many. Even in high-income countries, out-of-pocket costs deter individuals from seeking care until problems become severe.

3. Lack of Integration

Dental services are frequently siloed from the broader healthcare system. This separation limits opportunities for early detection of oral issues during routine medical visits and reduces coordinated care.

4. Shortage of Dental Professionals

There is a global shortage of trained dental professionals, particularly in underserved areas. This limits the capacity of health systems to meet oral health needs.

5. Low Public Awareness

Many people are unaware of the importance of oral hygiene or how to maintain it. This is compounded by inadequate public health messaging around dental care.

Public Health Strategies for Better Oral Health

Water Fluoridation

Community water fluoridation is a proven, cost-effective measure to reduce dental caries at a population level.

Health Education and Promotion

School-based programs, public campaigns, and parent engagement initiatives can instill healthy habits from an early age.

Mobile and Community Clinics

Mobile dental units and outreach initiatives help bridge gaps in care for remote or underserved populations.

Integration with Primary Care

Training physicians and nurses to conduct oral screenings ensures more comprehensive, preventative healthcare.

Policy Reforms and Coverage Expansion

Including dental services in public health insurance and subsidizing preventive care promotes broader access and affordability.

Integrating Dental care into public Health Systems

To improve outcomes, many experts advocate for the integration of dental care into primary healthcare systems. This means including dental services in universal health coverage plans, training medical professionals to conduct basic oral health assessments, and increasing funding for public dental clinics.

The Role of Technology in Dental Public Health

Teledentistry: Increases access in rural and remote areas.

Electronic Health Records: Improve coordination between dental and medical professionals.

Artificial Intelligence: Enhances diagnostic accuracy and efficiency.

Global Initiatives and WHO's Role

In 2021, the World Health Organization passed a landmark resolution on oral health, calling for global action to:

- Integrate oral health into universal health coverage (UHC)
- Promote preventive and cost-effective interventions
- Address social determinants of oral health

This marked a turning point in global efforts to elevate dental care within public health frameworks.

Conclusion

The integration of dental care into public health systems is essential for improving health equity, reducing chronic disease burden, and enhancing quality of life. By prioritizing prevention, improving access, and fostering interprofessional collaboration, public health can deliver more comprehensive and inclusive oral health solutions.